



Building a Life

AKBAR'S STORY

JUNE 2019

Seventeen-year-old Akbar* is the eldest of the five siblings – three sisters and two brothers. As a Class X student, academically 2019 is a crucial year for him. And while his focus is on his studies, there is a dream he nurtures silently, for himself and his family.

This is the story of Akbar, a child from the infamous red-light area of Kamathipura, Mumbai. This is his journey of overcoming the innumerable challenges innate to the red-light area to achieve a life of rights, choices, and dignity.

A MOTHER'S PREDICAMENT

Jyotima* hailed from an economically deprived family of sharecroppers from a village in Nadia district of the Indian state of West Bengal. In 1998, when Jyotima was 11, her cousin lured her to Sonagachi a red-light area in Kolkata the capital city of West Bengal under the pretext of getting her a decent job. It was only later that she realized her cousin's sinister scheme of avenging a family dispute. In 2000, Jyotima was sold to a 45-year-old regular customer Salim for marriage.

A LIFE OF EXPLOITATION & ABUSE

For the next five years from 2000-2005 Jyotima was in Sonagachi under the control of her *aadmi* Salim who abused, exploited, tortured and beat her up routinely. In 2001, Akbar was born and in 2004 she had her second child Rekha*. Not being able to endure any further abuse, she escaped from the clutches of her *aadmi* in 2005 when she was 18. She left for her village with four-year-old Akbar and infant Rakhi.

Jyotima went back to farming and her family members helped her raise her children. It continued for a month until yet another cousin found out that she was in the trade and lured her back to Mumbai on the pretext of giving her work in a factory. Jyotima agreed but was instead brought to Kamathipura, Lane No. 11 along with the children Akbar and Rakhi and handed over to the pimps.

In Kamathipura, the pimps held her captive in a caged brothel and tortured her till she broke down and yielded to their demand to entertain customers.



PRERANA'S INTERVENTION

It was 2005, during an outreach visit, Prerana's social workers spotted Akbar loitering across a road as Jyotima stood there soliciting. The social workers informed the mother about the Night Care Center (NCC) and its services, which included safe spaces to sleep and for recreation, among others. Other mothers, too, informed Jyotima about Prerana's Balwadi (pre-school) at Kamathipura after which Jyotima agreed to enroll Akbar at the NCC.

AT THE NCC

Four-year-old Akbar was enrolled at Prerana's Kamathipura NCC in 2005. The admission process included medical examinations such as complete blood count, X-Ray, a consultation with a pediatrician, etc. which was conducted with the consent of Jyotima. The medical examinations are done at the time of the child's admission into the NCC to ensure that the child receives timely treatment for any illness if required and to get an overall update on the child's health. Akbar's younger sister Rakhi could not be enrolled at the time as she was just a year old and too young to be away from her mother.

At the NCC, Akbar took part in all activities such as action songs, poems, drawing, origami, singing, etc. Jyotima ensured that she regularly attended the Mothers' Meeting conducted by Prerana.

A MOTHER'S CONCERN

Akbar was regular at Prerana's NCC from September 2005 to January 2007. In June 2007, Jyotima gave birth to her third child, Mohina*. During this period, the social workers discussed family planning measures with Jyotima and her overall health and wellbeing.

That was not for the first time the social worker spoke with Jyotima about family planning. Jyotima was scared to discuss it any further. She mentioned that her aadmi did not entertain such discussions, he was of the opinion that she would be less effective in entertaining her clients if she got herself sterilized. Jyotima expressed her utter helplessness in having any control over her pregnancies.

Jyotima was not in a position to handle three little children and hence she insisted on sending five-year-old Akbar back to the village and eventually she did. In his village, Akbar was being taken care of by his maternal grandparents. The team would regularly follow up on his wellbeing. Post a few conversations with Jyotima, the team found out that Akbar hadn't been enrolled in a school in the village. Prerana eventually intervened and discussed with Jyotima the importance of enrolling him in school. Prerana also offered to identify and connect her to a local NGO if she required any assistance for the protection and development of the child.

In 2008, when he turned six years, he was enrolled in a Bangla-medium school. Even though Akbar was not in Mumbai, Prerana continued to follow up on the child through Jyotima checking on his wellbeing and if she required any support.

RETURN TO THE NCC

Akbar continued to study in his village till 2012, until the age of 11. He had completed the third standard. In September 2012 Jyotima brought him back to Mumbai as her mother could no longer take care of Akbar due to her deteriorating health.

With the consent of both Jyotima and Akbar, Prerana enrolled him in the fourth standard at the Kamathipura Municipal School. At Prerana, he also started attending the evening study classes under Prerana's Education Support Program (ESP). Upon re-enrollment in the NCC, as per its protocol Prerana facilitated a complete medical check-up for Akbar through a local government hospital. All his health reports were normal.

At Prerana, Akbar settled in and took part in all the activities at the center. He took interest in handicrafts like *diya* (lamps) making and *kandil* (lanterns) making, science exhibitions, etc. He joined the singing session conducted by Songbound, actively participated in Prerana's Peer Group that created awareness in the community on social issues like HIV/AIDS and the harmful effects of consuming tobacco among others. He was also active in Prerana's Day to Day Summer Camp, sports activities and Life Skill Education sessions held at the center.

LACK OF FAMILY PLANNING

In January 2013, Jyotima's fourth child Noor Arshad* was born. According to her, it was her aadmi who had fathered the child. Four months after Noor Arshad was born, Jyotima was pregnant again. The girl – fifth and youngest of the siblings – was born in December 2013. Prerana once again discussed with her about family planning. This time Jyotima looked determined and at the risk of inviting brutal violence from her aadmi she decided to undergo sterilization. As per her request, the operation was conducted in strict confidentiality.

TRANSFER TO A CHILDREN'S HOME

By mid-2013, Jyotima was reluctant to keep 12-year-old Akbar in the basti (the red-light area) and wanted to move him out of the red-light area into a safe place. Six-month pregnant Jyotima was already in a very precarious condition with three small children, besides Akbar. Her aadmi had total control over her money /earnings. She was physically weak, yet was forced to solicit by the roadside. Due to these reasons, Jyotima began considering the option of getting her children

enrolled in a Children's Home which the community generally referred to as "boarding school". She consulted Prerana and also approached Salvation Army, who also run a Children's Home.

Prerana, on its part, helped in the efforts to place the child in a suitable Children's Home, as desired by Jyotima. The team was consulted Anjuman Islam charities in Mumbai to see if any vacancy was available. In the meantime, the staff at Salvation Army informed her about a vacancy in a Children's Home of an NGO in Ambarnath and helped her place Akbar there in August 2013.

**Note: The Prerana social workers/ team aren't sure if the child was admitted into this Children's Home with the order of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC).*

Akbar's medical examination was done towards the end of July 2013 and he tested positive for tuberculosis (TB). Since he was already placed in the NGO in Ambarnath, Prerana handed over the medical papers to Salvation Army requesting them to hand these papers over to the concerned NGO. The NGO in Ambarnath, however, did not follow up on the treatment prescribed by the doctors.

MEDICAL ASSESSMENT AND FOLLOW UP AT PRERANA

When a child is admitted to the NCC in Prerana, basic tests like Mantoux, Complete Blood Count, X-Ray, Sputum test, etc. are conducted. These tests are mostly to diagnose TB since the disease is rampant in Mumbai. At Prerana, not just a general check-up is done, but specific health concerns of children like stomach ache, skin infection, epilepsy, dental care, eye care, etc. too, are taken care of. Every fortnight, a pediatrician also visits all the centers. Prerana also has an in-house counselor.

In September 2013, Jyotima informed Prerana that the Home in Ambarnath was not appropriate for Akbar as they lacked even basic facilities due to which Akbar had missed an entire month of DOTS treatment. Jyotima informed Prerana that she was getting Akbar back to the area, and requested that he be readmitted into Prerana's NCC. She wanted her child to be safe and away from all the negative influences of the red-light area.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION AS THE LAST RESORT FOR REHABILITATION

A shelter facility has to ensure the care and protection of the child and also to facilitate the child's recovery and rehabilitation. However, rehabilitation remains a remote possibility if the child continues to face maltreatment instead of due care and protection. The child encounters violence every time she is denied the rightful minimum standard of care and support services. It takes various forms such as corporal punishment, verbal abuse, deprivation of food, clothing or even recreation. This violence continues when the child is denied opportunities to pursue education and vocational training. Every breach of confidentiality against the child, undue pressure to make her act/perform against her will, disrespectful behavior, misjudged counseling and therapy are all violent acts and go against the very mandate of shelter facilities.

At Prerana we ensure that every child in need of care and protection is placed in a Child Care Institution (Residential Care facility) with the Order of the Child Welfare Committee.

Section 27 to Section 30 of The Juvenile Justice (Care And Protection Of Children) Act, 2015 ensures that the Child Welfare Committee conducts at least two inspection visits per month of residential facilities for children in need of care and protection and ensure they adhere to the standards of care, safety and protection of children as stated in the law.

EFFORTS FOR REHABILITATION

On 27th September 2013, Akbar returned to Mumbai and started attending the Prerana's NCC at Kamathipura. Prerana tried to obtain Akbar's original medical papers from the NGO but to no avail. Eventually, Prerana took Akbar to the local Dots center RNTCP (Revised National Tuberculosis Control Program) Center and requested the concerned medical officer to start his treatment based on the photocopies of his original medical papers. In the meantime, Jyotima managed to obtain the original papers from the NGO. Jyotima was also counseled by Prerana on the importance of medical adherence with regard to TB. Akbar completed his DOTS treatment and recovered soon.

Twelve-year-old Akbar was readmitted into school again and enrolled in the fifth standard studying in a Hindi medium. Jyotima made efforts in the holistic development of the child. She regularly attended meetings in the school and at Prerana, and followed-up with regard to Akbar's progress.

REHABILITATION

In August 2014, when 13-year-old Akbar was in the sixth standard, Prerana's social workers approached SBT in Andheri and he was shifted to SBT's Open Shelter with the order of the CWC. During the follow-up visits, the social workers observed that Akbar had settled in well and actively participated in the programs at SBT, especially the dance activities.

BUILDING A MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Once, in October 2015, when Akbar was 14, he fell sick and his mother brought him back to the brothel for a few days. He found out that before his return, Jyotima's aadmi had fled taking away two-year-old Noor Arshad, Akbar's youngest brother, while she was soliciting by the roadside. The mother approached Prerana, which advised her to immediately inform the local police station. Jyotima lodged a complaint with the police and after four days the aadmi along with the child were found. After the duo was found, she came and confided in Prerana that she could

not endure further violence from the aadmi and did not wish to stay with him. She had been telling Prerana that as soon as she gets a chance she will move out of his captivity.

Akbar consoled his mother and also gave her a word that once he is done studying, he will earn and make sure that his family moves out of the red-light area. Akbar continued to have the fear that this *aadmi* someday might again attempt to flee taking Noor Arshad away.

TREADING DESPITE CHALLENGES

Ever since Akbar has been in SBT, he has been regular to school. During vacations, he stayed in Prerana's NCC and attended the Day to Day Summer Camp in 2016.

In June 2017, Akbar was transferred to another center of SBT in Borivali, Mumbai. Since Jyotima was apprehensive of how Akbar would adjust to the new space, Prerana's social workers facilitated her visit to the center.

In 2018, Akbar was enrolled in a private school and appeared for his tenth standard Board exams in 2019. Despite the challenges and distractions, he has kept his focus on his studies. There is a dream which he silently nurtures. A dream for his family and to be an adult commanding social respect for himself and his family.

Prerana, through its programs, believes in socialization and sharing rather than monopolization. It has maintained impactful and enriching partnerships with local and international corporations that have contributed to Prerana's programs to help the children of the red-light district grow and break the vicious cycle of deprivation and exploitation in the sex trade. It had always supported these children through potential collaborative programs and volunteering.

BUILDING A DREAM & A LIFE

For Akbar, his family comes first. His family of a mother, three sisters, and one younger brother is the treasure he preserves in his heart. Being the eldest, he adores and cares for them the most. Jyotima, in the meantime, is reconstructing her life by building a house back in her village and educating her children. Akbar understands his mother's efforts and focuses on his studies for his family's better future. His aim is clear – to study from the Industrial Training Institute (ITI) and acquire technical skills. He says there are no auto mechanics in his village and he wants to learn the skills at ITI and help his villagers. He also wants to hone his dancing skills and become a role model for his siblings.

Regular follow-ups are undertaken by Prerana ensured continuity of Akbar's formal education and care and support services for him. Despite the child being away, Prerana followed up on the case closely, which ensured that the child received adequate care services when he was back in the community. Prerana also followed up on his education, medical care, and institutional services constantly which ensured that the child received proper medical care and support services on time.

